



*Calvin & Servetus, Theodor Pixis, 1861*

## Errors of the Trinity

*Rid the country of those scoundrels, who stir up the people to revolt against us. Such monsters should be exterminated, as I have exterminated Michael Servetus.*

John Calvin, 1561

**T**HERE ARE ONLY TWO KNOWN extant copies of Michael Servetus's book, *Christianismi Restitutio* (*The Restoration of Christianity*), published in 1553. One is in the National Library in Paris, the other in the Imperial Royal Library in Vienna.

The survival of even these two is a small miracle, because what was at the time thought to be the last copy in existence was strapped to Servetus's side when he was burned alive in Geneva that same year.

Spanish physician and theologian Michael Servetus enjoyed the dubious distinction of being persecuted by both Catholics and Protestants, at a time in history when the two groups could agree on hardly anything.

Born in Aragon, Spain in 1511, Servetus was already a heretic at age 20. Struck by the absence of any mention of the Holy Trinity in the Bible and repelled by the gross excesses of the papacy and Church, he turned to Protestantism.

In *De Trinitatis Erroribus* (*On the Errors of the Trinity*) published in 1531, Servetus disavowed the existence of the Trinity, a heretical claim ever since the Arian controversies of the 4th and 5th centuries.

The Spanish Inquisition ordered his arrest in May of the following year, but Servetus had already fled the country to teach and study medicine in Paris, and after embarking on a journey throughout Europe, he set up a successful medical practice in Vienne.

During this period, Servetus was engaged in correspondence with John Calvin, a student he had met at the University of Paris.

In *Christianismi Restitutio*, Servetus reaffirmed his rejection of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, as well as expressing doubts about predestination and original sin, concepts likewise considered by the Church to be fundamental to Christianity.

Not surprisingly, Calvin considered this a personal attack, having emphasized the importance of predestination in his seminal 1536 book *Institutio Christianae Religionis* (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*).

Unlike Calvin, Servetus believed all men were capable and worthy of being saved. He even postulated that human physiology revealed man's divine connection to God, writing poetically, "He who understands... the breathing of man has already sensed the breath of God and thereby saved his soul."

In support of this unorthodox view, *Christianismi Restitutio* included Servetus' revolutionary views on the circulation of the blood via the lungs, theories likely based on earlier, relatively unknown discoveries of Arab physician Ibn Al Nafis (1213-1288).

Until Servetus, Galen's theory of blood circulation had prevailed, in which blood flowed from the lungs to the heart, rather than in the opposite direction, absorbing oxygen through capillaries in the lungs.

Servetus sent a draft of *Christianismi Restitutio* to Calvin, who had already written to an ally that if Servetus were to ever visit Geneva, "if my authority is of any avail, I will not suffer him to get out alive."

In April 1553, Servetus was arrested and imprisoned in Vienne, but he managed to escape three days later, leaving the judges having to settle for burning him in effigy.

Then, en route to Italy, Servetus unwisely chose to stop in Geneva, where, recklessly, he attended one of Calvin's sermons, perhaps hoping for a final chance for absolution.

Instead, Calvin—engaged in a local power struggle and seeking to solidify his position—denounced Servetus to the Inquisition.

Although poor health prevented Calvin from attending Servetus' mock trial in person, his testimony was crucial to his two month-long imprisonment and prosecution.

Condemned for preaching heresy and failing in his appeal for the more humane punishment of beheading—Servetus was burned at the stake on October 27, 1553, along with his books. He was 42 years old.

Servetus's pyre was fueled with green wood, condemning him to an agonizing, deliberately prolonged death. It took over thirty minutes for him to succumb, as he cried "Mercy, mercy!" to the jeering crowd.

With the death of Servetus, Calvin drove out the 'Libertines' who opposed him and gained complete control over Geneva.

Servetus's medical discoveries—of which his theory about blood circulation was only the most notable—were suppressed by the Church, along with the theological claims in which they were embedded, tragically forgotten until William Harvey's ground-breaking work on circulation 75 years later.

Ironically, Calvin had at one time himself been forced to go into hiding for heresy, and while challenging the dogma of the Church, Servetus steadfastly believed in the divinity of Jesus and was undeniably a devout Christian, merely advocating a return to the simplicity of the Gospels and the teachings of the early Church Fathers. (Servetus' final words before being set aflame were, "Jesus, Son of the eternal God, have mercy on me!")

Unrepentant to the end, Micheal Servetus ended his final letter from prison with these defiant words to his oppressors: "I will burn, but this is a mere event. We shall continue our discussion in eternity." ■